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ABSTRACT

Employers expect their employees to have basic skills in reading, writing, and math; speaking and listening skills; problem-solving ability; employability skills; reasoning skills; leadership skills; computer literacy; interpersonal skills; ability-to-learn/learning-how-to-learn skills; and collaborative/teamwork skills. How well do employers think vocational education is preparing its graduates? Results of studies conducted since 1985 demonstrate that employers continue to view vocational graduates favorably. The following recommendations for improving vocational education were offered by three recent studies: (1) more communication and closer collaboration between business/industry and education; (2) more and better publicity concerning vocational education so that its image can be improved; (3) integration of reading, writing, and math instruction into vocational instruction; (4) identification of and instruction in a common core of employability skills that are transferable across occupations, including problem-solving and decision-making skills necessary for getting and keeping a job; (5) more opportunities for supervised work experience; and (6) emphasis on applied basic skills and employability skills in secondary programs and technical skills in postsecondary programs. (Ten references are included.) (CML)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATIONS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The primary goal of vocational education is to prepare youth and adults for employment. Vocational educators have always understood the importance of this goal, and during the 1980s, it has also become a national priority. Changing demographics in combination with technological developments have placed the education and training of the work force on the national agenda.

Continuing slow growth of the population means that there will be a smaller pool of potential workers available to employers in the future (Johnston and Packer 1987). The composition of the pool will also change. According to a *U.S. News and World Report* cover story ("The Forgotten Half" 1989), "the 1990s mark the end of the era of the white male worker, traditionally the nation's best-educated employee. Between now and the year 2000, a stunning 57 percent of all labor-force growth will be black, Hispanic or other minorities, who receive less schooling" (pp. 46-47). Also, more and more women will enter the work force, and by the year 2000 approximately 47 percent of the labor force will be female (Johnston and Packer 1987).

At the same time, the demands of the workplace are changing. "A growing percentage of jobs, in high or low tech, in the service or the manufacturing sectors, need a more sophisticated labor force to compete domestically and internationally ("Preparing Today for Tomorrow's Economy" 1988, p. 4). For example, a study of manufacturers in the rural South found that automated manufacturing requires workers with qualitatively different skills and behaviors including higher-order skills, flexibility, and the ability to participate in operating decisions (Rosenfeld 1988).

In the current climate, employer expectations of vocational education are of key interest to a number of groups. This **ERIC Digest**, an update of **ERIC Digest No. 34** (Axelrod 1984), examines changing employer expectations for vocational education. First, the types of skills employers expect workers to possess are described. Next, research findings related to employers' perceptions of vocational education are presented. Finally, some recommendations are made related to vocational education's role in preparing youth and adults for employment.

Skills Employers Want

During the 1980s, the range of skills employers expect workers to have has expanded. This change in employers' expectations has resulted from the changing nature of workers' roles in the workplace (Rosenfeld 1988). Although employers are still interested in hiring individuals who have received occupationally specific training, they also want individuals with a solid grounding in basic academic skills.

The types of basic skills employers expect their employees to possess have been listed in a number of publications (e.g., College Entrance Examination Board 1984; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 1988; Rosenfeld 1988; "What Employers Say about Vocational Education in South Carolina" 1986). The following categories of skills are a synthesis of these lists: basic skills in reading, writing, and math; communication skills, both speaking and listening; problem-solving ability; employability skills; reasoning skills; leadership skills; computer literacy; interpersonal skills; ability-to-learn/learning-how-to-learn skills; and collaborative/teamwork skills.

What Employers Say about Vocational Education

Given their changing expectations for employees, what do employers say about their experiences with vocational graduates? Both national and state studies of employers' perceptions of vocational education that were conducted prior to 1985 revealed that on the whole employers were satisfied with vocational graduates. According to a majority of state studies, vocational graduates were rated higher than other entry-level employees on most dimensions except for that of employability (e.g., basic literacy, work habits and attitudes, interview skills). Pre-1985 national studies also showed that employers were satisfied with the performance of vocational graduates and preferred them as workers over those who had not had such training ("What Employers Say about Vocational Education in South Carolina" 1986).

Results of studies conducted since 1985 demonstrate that employers continue to view vocational graduates favorably (Donovan 1986; Hollenbeck 1987; "What Employers Say about Vocational Education in South Carolina" 1986). In his study of South Dakota employers, Hollenbeck (1987) found that when respondents hired high school graduates for entry-level positions, over 60 percent had a strong preference for vocationally trained individuals. Respondents reported that vocational education graduates are more enthusiastic, require less training, and are preferred over college- or military-trained persons as well as individuals with several years' work experience.

A study of South Carolina employers also reported a preference among employers for hiring vocational graduates ("What Employers Say about Vocational Education in South Carolina" 1986). Forty-six percent of the respondents said that they definitely preferred vocational graduates, whereas 27 percent preferred them "to some extent," with the remaining 27 percent having no preference.

Hollenbeck also examined South Dakota employers' perceptions of the differences between vocationally and nonvocationally trained workers, and, again, vocational graduates were rated more favorably. According to employer comments, vocationally trained workers had better work attitudes, exhibited more common sense, and were more enthusiastic than their nonvocationally trained counterparts.

A study conducted by the National Alliance of Business (Donovan 1986) and the South Carolina study examined why some employers do not benefit from vocational education. Both found that when employers do not hire vocational graduates, it usually has to do with a lack of need for the graduates (i.e., not hiring) or general lack of knowledge about availability of vocational programs rather than with

reservations about the quality of training provided to vocational participants.

These three studies used a variety of methods to examine different facets of employers' experiences with vocational graduates, so it is not possible to generalize from their results. Nevertheless, the following common themes related to employer expectations for vocational education emerged from the studies' findings:

- **Basic Skills.** Employers believe that vocational education should focus on developing applied basic skills. Although most employers felt that graduates of vocational programs had adequate basic skills to perform entry-level jobs, they acknowledged that basic skill deficiencies can hinder job performance and limit an employee's ability to profit from further training.

- **Communication.** Lack of communication between vocational educators and employers has resulted in the failure of employers to hire vocational graduates as well as the failure of vocational educators to develop appropriate training programs.

- **Image.** Employers expressed a need for an improved image for vocational education. Although they are satisified with vocationally trained employees, many employers still perceive vocational education as a "dumping ground" from which good students are diverted.

- **Employability Skills.** In addition to applied basic skills, employers expressed a need for employees to have employability skills. Again, although they were generally satisfied with vocational graduates in this regard, a number of employers expressed concern about what they perceive to be a decline in the traditional work ethic.

Recommendations

Despite the fact that changes in the workplace require workers with a broader range of skills, employers still seem satisfied with the vocationally trained graduates that they hire. However, based on employer comments about their experiences with vocationally trained employees, the three studies (Donovan 1986, Hollenbeck 1987, and "What Employers Say about Vocational Education in South Carolina" 1986) made a number of recommendations for vocational education:

- More communication and closer collaboration between business/industry and education

- In order to improve its image, more and better publicity concerning vocational education

- The teaching of basic academic skills such as reading, math, and writing integrated into vocational instruction

- Identification of and instruction in a common core of employability skills that are transferable across occupations including problem-solving and decision-making skills and the skills necessary for getting and keeping a job

- In order to develop work maturity skills, more opportunities for supervised work experience that provide close articulation between in-school educational experience and on-the-job experience

- Emphasis on applied basic skills and employability skills in secondary programs and technical skills in postsecondary programs

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